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SUBJECT: STUDENTS WILL PLAY ONLY A MINOR ROLE IN UPCOMING
ELECTIONS

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Classified By: POLITICAL COUNSELOR FRANCISCO FERNANDEZ
FOR REASON 1.4 (D)

¶11. (C) Summary: Widely perceived as the most trustworthy group in the country, student leaders are now trying to preserve their voice and role in Venezuelan politics. Many leaders eschew a direct political role, especially in the upcoming November 23 elections. However, some former leaders who rose to fame during last year's student demonstrations have begun their own political careers with limited success. Other students have begun working on get-out-the-vote activities financed by the USG and other donors while some have worked on the campaigns of specific candidates. Our recent encounters with students indicate that there is great concern about violence against student leaders, including the assassination of Maracaibo University leader Julian Soto. Students seem to be searching for an issue that can serve as a catalyst to return them to their perceived role as defenders of Venezuelan democracy. In general the Nov. 23 elections have not proven to be a strong rallying cry. According to student leaders, the BRV has taken advantage of this lull in activity to strengthen government supporters in the universities with an eye towards silencing the movement in the future. End Summary.

STUDENTS TURNED CANDIDATES

¶12. (SBU) Student activists met September 12 in Caracas to present consensus candidates for the legislative councils under the motto of, "committed to the future, youths take a step forward for the country." The keystone speaker was former Andres Bello Catholic University (UCAB) student president Yon Goicoechea, who announced that "the hour had arrived" for students to "transform" and participate politically, rather than simply criticize the BRV.

¶13. (C) Former UCAB student leader Freddy Guevara launched his political career under the UNT banner, kicking off his campaign on October 1 as a candidate for the Caracas city council for the upscale Baruta borough. As president of the UNT's "Youths for Social Democracy," he affirmed that the youth leaders would be active in the townhalls and legislative councils, and that "the fight" does not only take place through street protests. Fellow UNT activist and former UCV president Stalin Gonzalez is running for the mayorship of Liberator municipality, but even his close supporters tell us he is not winning much public support as a candidate. There are 22 registered candidates vying for the position, including former Vice President Jorge Rodriguez.

Gonzalez has offered a ten-step program to "rescue" the city and has received considerable press attention, but may simply lack the political experience to succeed in such a contentious race.

¶4. (SBU) Nixon Moreno, a former president of the umbrella student federation, tried to run for the legislative council in Merida state, but the National Electoral Council declared him "ineligible." He has been holed up in the Vatican's Embassy since March 2007 fleeing trumped up politically-motivated charges of rape and assault during a demonstration. Recently, current UCAB student president David Smolanski called on all the candidates running in November to make combating crime their priority. Noting Soto's assassination, he told the press, "we all want to live in peace."

TENSIONS ON CAMPUS

¶5. (C) The public Central University of Venezuela (UCV) plans to hold its student elections on November 7. The winners will have significant budgetary and oversight responsibilities. UCV student leaders, including student president Ricardo Sanchez (Protect), told Poloffs October 6 that they were concerned about the BRV, which he said is offering funding to any candidate willing to challenge them. They said they feel abandoned in terms of resources by the opposition and pressured by the government. They note that the parties expect the students to "take to the streets," but they do not want to be "cannon fodder." Student leaders also tell us they have been engaging in street theater as a form of political protest, including a skit involving a suitcase

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as an allusion to the Antonini campaign finance "suitcase scandal" unfolding currently in Miami. The students also played drums and marched to the National Assembly building, pretending to be conspirators in a "magnicido" plot against the President.

¶6. (SBU) A group of students at the Ezequiel Zamora National Experimental University of the Western Plains in Barinas state corralled PSUV gubernatorial candidate Adan Chavez into a room for an hour and a half. They peacefully protested against "unfilled promises" he had made last August. According to pro-opposition daily El Universal, the students rejected the use of the university for campaigning, shouting in unison that "we don't want more tricks here."

STUDENT SOUL SEARCHING

¶7. (C) According to UCV student body president Ricardo Sanchez, the student movement is at a crossroads. Student leaders, faced with the latest incidents of violence in Zulia and Merida as well as sustained government efforts to oust them, are re-evaluating the goals of the movement. Per Sanchez, while students enjoy popular support and are seen as trustworthy according to polls, they are being squeezed by both the government and opposition. As an example, Sanchez outlined how his student organization has provided free medical and legal clinics in poor neighborhoods, earning the enmity of the Chavez government. These outreach efforts and the popular support they engender have also made mainstream opposition parties wary of the students. According to Sanchez, both the Chavistas and the opposition see the student movement and its leaders as potential competitors.

¶8. (C) Sanchez also stated that foreign donors have ceased to support the students, so they have been left to their own devices. At the same time, the Chavez government has made a concerted effort to finance pro-government student groups and

bring Chavistas into the universities. Sanchez opines that the BRV seeks to create a student base that is pro-government and predicts the effort will be successful in two or three years when the large mass Chavista students starts running for student leadership positions. Sanchez cautions that while the universities have long been bastions of opposition, it is quite possible that within a few years the situation could change as opposition voices will simply be drowned out by the new Chavista majority.

¶ 9. (C) A new, and very unsettling wrinkle is the up-tick in violence against student leaders. According to many student leaders, it is impossible to determine the real cause behind the attacks, but no motive can be discarded, including political intimidation. Student activists from several universities have protested the violence, and are linking it to the growing crime problem while demanding action from the BRV. Some student leaders see the violence as a clear warning. Others are seeking to work with NGOs to examine the crime problem and present possible solution to it. Students seem to agree, however, that the violence has been very effective in forcing student leaders to worry about their safety and consider tempering their actions.

COMMENT

¶ 10. (C) The student movement gained the trust of the population during the referendum campaign, and student leaders are now seeking ways to sustain public support. Some leaders who graduated have gone on to try to capitalize on their experience organizing students and press coverage to pursue public office in November. The leaders who remain, however, have grown cautious about taking such public stances because there is some feeling among the student ranks that student leaders had forgotten their base of support and are using the movement to advance personal interests. Current student leaders do not want to feed this discontent by actively participating in partisan politics, but they do wish to maintain the student movement as independent and objective as possible.

¶ 11. (C) The BRV's efforts have put pressure on the student movement, as has the lack of financial and moral support from both the opposition and civil society. Absent some compelling national issue, it is likely that the student

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movement will continue to work on the margins of the November 23 elections, not rising up as it did during the referendum last year. As the current leaders point out, however, without some continued support from opposition parties, civil society and interested foreign governments, it is quite possible that the independent student voice may soon be muffled by BRV efforts to develop a pro-government alternative. The first test may come as early as the November 7 Central University Venezuela (UCV) student elections. End Comment.

CAULFIELD